

Should L2 reading instruction be comprehension-based or language-based? Response to Taylor's comment

Irena Kuzborska
University of York
United Kingdom

Second language (L2) reading teachers seem to have long been faced with a dilemma of whether L2 reading instruction should be comprehension-strategy based or language-skills based. No doubt, the answer to this question would depend on a number of factors: students' proficiency level, their language learning needs, the teaching situation, and many others. In addition to the contextual considerations, I also suggest that teachers' decisions should be informed by research proposed ideas. Thus, although I agree that the issue of language transfer, highlighted by Taylor (2012) when commenting on the English teachers' practices in my study (2011a), is relevant to observe in the context of the teaching of reading, I would also like to add more to what has been discussed by Taylor on this issue.

It is true that L2 proficiency in L2 reading is critical or that there should be some minimal level of threshold of L2 proficiency before first language (L1) reading strategies can be transferred (Carrell, 1991). However, I would also emphasize that the linguistic threshold means that it is not a fixed set of language knowledge that students need but rather a variable amount of linguistic knowledge "depending on the reader, the text and the topic" (Grabe & Stoller, 2002, p. 51). A higher linguistic threshold is required, the more demanding the text. Indeed, as my analysis of the teachers' designed materials for advanced level students demonstrated (Kuzborska, 2011b), texts containing many unfamiliar words made the texts challenging even for the advanced level students. Undoubtedly, these words had to be mastered in order for the students to read the texts fluently. In other words, the students needed to reach the threshold level for those particular texts so that L1 reading strategies could be applied into their L2 reading. Thus, although it is perhaps possible to speculate that the teachers in my study were helping their students to reach the appropriate L2 proficiency level, believing that the students would then transfer their L1 reading skills automatically, as Taylor (2012) seemed to suggest, the teachers' practices and their comments revealed no evidence of this consideration.

In addition to L1 reading skills not being an easily accessible resource for L2 students, I would also like to point out that L1 transfer may not always be beneficial for L2 reading. That is to say, even having good L1 reading skills, it is not always the case that these L1 skills will be successful in L2 reading. This success can be greatly constrained by the existing differences between two languages at various levels: (a) linguistic, (b) individual, (c) socio-cultural, or (d) institutional (Grabe, 2009). Thus, although it is true that there are universal cognitive processes, such as, setting goals, engaging in reading strategies, utilizing working-memory, or drawing on long-term memory (background knowledge), there are also variations in how these universal

principles are operationalized in different languages (Grabe, 2009). A good example to illustrate the point is the reading of editorials. As Grabe (2009, p. 139) explained, writing editorials differs in different cultures because there are preferred institutional or educational ways to carry out social roles through texts. Put differently, in order to inform, entertain, or persuade readers through texts, information in texts might be organized in very specific ways: Depending on the culture, there could be different preferences for what counts as argument, evidence, or persuasive emphasis. Thus, although certain ways of expressing social roles might be a common practice in certain cultures, these practices can be seen by L2 learners as unusual, disorganized, ineffective, or even hard to understand. More specifically, as Grabe commented, students might find difficulties in understanding how main ideas are presented and developed, persuasive arguments are made, evidence is presented, repetition and paraphrases are used, new information is organized, or critical interpretations are to be inferred.

There are now an increasing number of studies on discourse analysis that have shown that academic literacies vary enormously and that there are different expectations and perceptions about what counts as a good practice (Candlin & Plum, 1999; Swales, 1998). Thus, given these research findings, it seems imperative that we, as L2 reading teachers, also be aware of different cultural preferences for structuring texts and seek ways of helping students to learn these differences. To be more precise, we need to provide our students with sufficient opportunities to read different genres (preferably, the most needed) and for different purposes, and to explicitly educate them on how to approach different genres in appropriate ways.

The teaching of strategies, I argue, is thus essential regardless of students' L2 proficiency level; however, it is by exploring which L1 skills and strategies might be positive supports for L2 reading development that we can make students' reading experiences more successful and enjoyable.

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About the Author

Irena Kuzborska is a lecturer in second language education at the University of York, UK. Her research interests include reading, language teacher education, English for Academic Purposes, and materials design. She has published papers on language teachers' beliefs and practices in the teaching of reading to university students. Email: irena.kuzborska@york.ac.uk